New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
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Listed alphabetically are the names of actors and actresses in shows opening during the year 1952. The number opposite the name indicates the pages on which each is found in NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS. We regret that we cannot include the various cast changes, but can only give the opening night casts as published in the New York newspapers.

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"The Children's Hour"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 19, 1952

'The Children's Hour'

By WALTER F. KERR

"THE CHILDREN'S HOUR" was never a play which traded on its more or less sensational subject matter. In writing of a malicious schoolchild's lie about an "unnatural" relationship between two of her teachers, and of the lives that were destroyed before the truth could come out, Lillian Hellman had used harrowing materials as a base of operations: as a starting point for some acutely observed character studies, some honestly felt and honestly written dramatic situations.

In the careful revival which Kermit Bloomgarden has given the eighteen-year-old play at the Coronet, there are still stinging moments. The spectacle of a venomous and mentally sick child whispering obscene slanders into her grandmother's ear remains a shockingly vivid theatrical experience. The anguished effort of three innocent victims to hammer the truth out of this elusive demon once more makes for a breathless scene. The contempt with which a woman whose life has been wrecked dismisses the final and abject apology made to her is raw and biting stuff.

* * *

Yet for all that is candid and vigorous about the play's writing, a certain slackness has crept into its present production. The tensions move upward at an uneven, erratic rate; and some of its macabre developments no longer seem wholly credible.

No doubt our very familiarity with the play—it was Miss Hellman's first resounding success—has something to do with this. Because its content is remembered in considerable detail, we tend to anticipate its key scenes and to tick them off mechanically as they go by. But not all of the anticipation is out front; some of it is in the performance.

* * *

In at least two of the principal roles Miss Hellman would seem to have directed her actresses for an initial over-emphasis which telegraphs most of the punches far in advance and leaves the characters very little room in which to grow. This is especially true of Patricia Neal's playing of the doomed Martha Dobie. Miss Neal, recently rescued from Hollywood, is a handsome, bony girl with a fetchingly husky voice. She has her electric moments in the course of the evening's torments, and she displays a fine flair for Miss Hellman's occasional comic ironies. But her work is markedly mannish from the outset, a suggestion which tends to cloud the issue before it can be joined. And she is, from the rise of the curtain, overwrought—setting her jaw, swallowing hard, and staring feverishly into space in the manner of a hysteric who is bound for trouble, lie or no lie.

* * *

And Iris Mann's portrait of the satanic little troublemaker has all sorts of malevolence, but very little real guile, in it. While Miss Mann is pursuing her snarling and domineering ways, she is fiendishly effective. But the part is painted in a single color—a pretty definite black—and the child finally emerges as far too transparent a monster to gain the credence of a dozen intelligent people.

The truest and most moving playing comes from Kim Hunter, as the teacher who loses both her school and her lover before justice is done, and Katherine Emmet, here repeating her original role of the well-meaning but too doting grandmother. When these two come together in a devastating final scene, Miss Hellman's driving language and emotional power are done full justice. Elsewhere Miss Hunter brings a clear-headed force to her moments of defiance, and a refreshing simplicity to a passage in which she must help her fiance over his own psychological hurdles.

As it stands, "The Children's Hour" remains a remarkably shrewd and incisive melodrama, but one which has lost a good deal of its vitality through unsubtle, unshaded playing.

"THE CHILDREN'S HOUR"

Play by Lillian Hellman; staged by Miss Hellman; settings by Howard Bay; costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden at the Coronet Theatre, December 18, 1952. The cast:

Peggy Rogers.....Sandra March
Catherine.....Nancy Plehn
Lois Fisher.....Carolyn King
Mrs. Lily Mortar..Mary Finney
Evelyn Munn..Denise Alexander
Helen Burton.....Toni Hallaran
Rosalie Wells.....Janet Parker
Janet.....June Connolly
Leslie.....Sandee Preston
Mary Tilford.....Iris Mann
Karen Wright.....Kim Hunter
Martha Dobie.....Patricia Neal
Dr. Joseph Cardin.....
Robert Pastene
Agatha.....Leora Thatcher
Mrs. Amelia Tilford.....
Katherine Emmet
A Grocery Boy...Gordon Russell

New York Post

December 19, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

'The Children's Hour' Scores Again

If only because it demonstrates to a lean and backward theatrical season what the American drama could and can be, the revival of "The Children's Hour" is a welcome and exciting event. Presented last night at the Coronet 18 years after its first memorable New York production, Lillian Hellman's stunning tragedy about the impact of scandal on troubled lives proved once more to be the sort of brilliant and powerful play that is not only as striking as we veterans had made it in our memories but has for today the forthright emotional power which recalls to a doubting generation how stirring the theater can really be.

I suppose almost everyone who has any interest in the stage will remember what "The Children's Hour" is about. Lest you have forgotten, I shall recall for you that it is concerned with how a vicious and monstrous little girl, filled with pathological venom and spite, spreads a tale of Lesbian relationship between two young women conducting a school which she is attending, persuades a gullible old lady of the truth of her libel, and thereby wrecks the lives of the teachers she has come to hate so vindictively. It is stark tragedy, bitter and unrelieved, and it is superbly written and played.

Beyond Melodrama

In its account of how the horrible child plans her vengeance and completely entraps both her helpless victims and her innocent tools, Miss Hellman's play is a sort of terror melodrama of enormous fascination. But it is also considerably more than that. Mixed with its theatrical excitement, there is an honest and merciless probing into the hideous effect of scandal on the minds of those subjected to it. Not only do the young schoolteachers suffer from the convinced suspicions of their neighbors, but they begin to believe it themselves and things that had remained innocent in their subconsciousness rise to torment them.

In addition to her vast technical skill and her probing intelligence, Miss Hellman has two other great virtues as a dramatist. One of them is that she is not afraid of scenes that are charged with the highest emotional intensity and the most unrelenting power. The other is that she knows how to set down the sort of characterizations that actors, who are themselves not afraid of emotional intensity, can play with unashamed force. The result is that "The Children's Hour" mingles highly-charged theatrical excitement with credibility, intelligence and the kind of power too rarely seen in the theater these days.

When the play was first presented here in 1934, the role of the terrible child was played by an adult actress named Florence McGee, who was brilliantly successful in it. Of necessity, however, there was something of a virtuoso stunt about what she did. In the curent version the part is actually portrayed by a child, the young Iris Mann, who scared us all in "The Innocents" a couple of years ago, and the effect is all the more impressive. Miss Mann is a young actress of remarkable insight and brilliance, who mixes the sinister with a hint of eerie, youthful beauty, and she makes the evil little villainess both abominable and utterly believable.

The two young schoolmistresses are played by Kim Hunter and Patricia Neal, and I think Miss Hunter gives the finest performance I have seen an actress offer all season. There can be no doubt any longer that she is a player of the highest capacity. I thought Miss Neal, as the girl who discovers that there is really abnormality in her, rather gave the secret away in an early scene, but she plays the final episode admirably. Katherine Emmet, who was in the original cast, is once more splendid as the gullible grandmother, and Robert Pastene is good as the young doctor. "The Children's Hour" is again the drama of the season.

The New York Times

December 19, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour" was a sound play originally, it is still powerful and lacerating in the production put on at the Coronet last evening. It may, in fact, have grown a bit in stature. In 1934 it was a self-contained story about two school teachers whose lives were destroyed by a false accusation of abnormal sexual relations; and that was sufficiently shocking at the time.

But now we know that lives can be destroyed by other types of slander. Having been intelligently written for the values of 1934, "The Children's Hour" fits the world of today just as accurately. Literally, it is still the story of the two hounded school teachers, but the implications are much broader now and have new political overtones. * * *

Theatregoers who saw the original production may have forgotten that the first of the three acts is a tame introduction into infamy; and some of them, like this reviewer, may be under the impression that the last ten minutes constitute an anti-climax. But it does take Miss Hellman a full act and perhaps a little more to get her drama in motion. Most of the pupils in the Wright-Dobie School are fairly commonplace, and the little monster who finally wrecks the school does not set off her explosion of gossip until the second act.

From that moment on, "The Children's Hour" never falters. The pace is swift; the dialogue is bare and unyielding. Once the false rumors are out, no one can stop them. The consequences are agonizing. Miss Hellman has never written so tersely and accurately. Those last ten minutes or so of retribution are still a little overwritten; Miss Hellman insists upon saying some things that are superfluous in the stunned atmosphere of her summing-up. But not many things. She needs that final twist of the dagger. She is entitled to show that the slanderer is doomed as thoroughly as those who have been slandered, and that righteousness is a ruthless form of vanity and that there is no way of undoing a wrong committed out of a sanctimonious attitude.

Serving as her own director, Miss Hellman has organized an excellent performance. Howard Bay has designed one dingy setting for the school and an imposingly genteel one for the house of the calumniator. In these contrasted environments, the performance—once it gets rolling—is superb. Kim Hunter and Patricia Neal play the parts of the schoolteachers with great skill—Miss Hunter soft and grave in her responses to the situation, Miss Neal tall, gaunt, wild and incredulous.

* * *

As the little sadist who drags evil into every situation, Iris Mann gives a marvelous performance. Cunning, hateful, hysterical, she plays savagely yet always with control. Katherine Emmet, a graduate of the original production, plays a gentlewoman with pride that is heartless in the second act and remorse that is crushing at the end. As the suitor to one of the schoolteachers, Robert Pastene gives a discerning performance; and Mary Finney plays the part of the troublesome aunt with insight into a difficult character.

Things have changed a lot in eighteen years. But "The Children's Hour" is still taut and pertinent.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

December 19, 1952

'Children's Hour' At 18, Still Shocks

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Eighteen years is a tough test for any play. After that period, "The Children's Hour" turns out just as shattering as it was in the first place.

The added years have brought much consideration to the uses of slander, which is the subject of this tragedy. We have all learned a lot about condemnation without trial, as well as about accusations to which answers are impotent. In "The Children's Hour" a sick, wretched child destroys the lives of at least four people with malicious lies.

You may recall that the spoiled and monstrous instigator of the troubles distracts attention from her own misbehavior by implying that the two mistresses of her boarding school are unnaturally fond of each other. Before she is through, once committed and eerily watchful for each chance to enhance her story, she has blackmailed another student, wiped out the school, ruined the marriage of one teacher and ended the life of another, while she leaves her adoring grandmother devastated.

Gripping Theater.

The final condemnation of the drama is of the old woman, whose righteousness has forced her to act willfully on her grandchild's shocking charge. "Go and be noble in the street!" is the contemptuous order of the surviving teacher, when the woman confesses her mistake, "I have a dead friend!"

The second half of the second act, when the child ingenuously convinces her elders of her sincerity, is as gripping theater as it is possible to imagine. The latter part of the last act is also deeply impressive. It seems that Lillian Hellman has always written with fire and shrewdness.

Many Eccentrics.

She may tamper with the law of averages in gathering so many eccentric people together, but they are individually and collectively believable. The performance could benefit from more shakedown than it has had.

The performances seem to be exactly what is demanded by the play. Patricia Neal lets her character's faint neurosis lead her into deep terror. Kim Hunter moves from warm realism to chilly unbelief as the survivor.

Iris Mann, a fledgling Lady Macbeth, handles the intricate complexities of the villainous child with incredible aplomb. Katherine Emmett is moving again as the grandmother, and Robert Pastene is just agreeable and colorless enough as the doctor fiance. Mary Finney proves expert with the showy range of the tragi-comic aunt.

DAILY NEWS

December 19, 1952

Revival of 'The Children's Hour' Strong in Plot, Weak in Acting

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Lillian Hellman's melodramatic tragedy, "The Children's Hour," still is a big meat-and-potatoes play which deals with the horrifying bitchery of a small girl and the suspected unnatural relationship of the two young women who run the private school which this terrible tot attends. Eighteen years after its first controversial performance here, the play was revived last evening at the Coronet Theatre, and doubtless I should be more enthusiastic about it than I am. It needs stronger acting in some of its roles than it gets.

The leads in the revival are played by Iris Mann, Kim Hunter and Patricia Neal. Miss Mann strikes me as being just as wonderfully shifty and evil a little girl as Florence McGee was in the original performance, and this is high praise. But somewhere in the course of last evening I lost interest in and sympathy for Mlles. Neal and Hunter, and therefore I lost interest in the drama. "The Children's Hour" is a fine and fruity piece of playwriting and it needs fine and fruity acting, which it doesn't get except from Miss Mann.

A Very Dirty Lie.

Since nobody is expected to remember anything for 18 years, a recap of the plot is in order. Two young women, eight years out of college, have built up a nice private school for girls. One of their pupils, a showoff and a psychopathic liar, makes up a story about the unwholesome affection between these two young women. The girl tells this story to her wealthy and socially powerful grandmother, and grandma spreads the tale. Ruin is the result. The school loses its pupils, one of the young proprietors loses her fiance, and the partner commits suicide.

Miss Hellman's writing of this play remains taut and vigorous—but, after all, it isn't a classic. It wants taut and vigorous playing and it wasn't getting enough last evening. Both Miss Hunter, as the young woman who is about to be married until the dirty story starts, and Miss Neal, the slightly masculine partner, seemed hesitant about what they were doing. I didn't care at all for Robert Pastene's acting of the doctor who is engaged to Miss Hunter, but I did admire Katherine Emmet's performance in her original role of the grandmother.

Miss Hellman has directed her own play. Howard Bay has provided the two settings.

Journal American

December 19, 1952

A Welcome, Though Gruesome, Addition

By JOHN McCLAIN

LILLIAN HELLMAN'S "Children's Hour" was brought back to the boards of the Coronet Theatre last night and established, once again, that there is a future in futility. After 18 years this utterly depressing drama of the loves of two schoolmistresses and the Machiavellian tactics of one of their charges still stacks up as a compelling evening in the theatre.

From the opening curtain there is nothing to leaven the atmosphere of doom which slowly overtakes all concerned.

Here are two attractive and apparently normal young ladies running a school for girls. Then, suddenly, all hell breaks loose in the form of a little monster who combats their efforts to discipline her by telling her grandmother that the two teachers have an unnatural affection for one another.

Wrecks 4 Lives

This leads to the hopeless dissolution of at least four lives: the two accused, the young man who was about to marry one of them, and the grandmother, who learns too late the error of her ways.

One might even assume that the little culprit will pay heavily for her evil deeds—but I have a different theory. I think she probably grows up to be a great actress, for she certainly shows promise at an early age.

Be that as it may, the polish and precision with which the play is developed, the measured tragedy that mounts toward the final futile moments keep the clients riveted at attention.

These are not improbable people, any of them, and there are times at which one can barely suppress the urge to climb onto the stage and belt the brains out of the little brat who is causing all the catastrophe.

Miss Hellman seems to be at her best in the deep simplicity of grief. There is a memorable scene between the grandmother and one of the stricken teachers which should be recommended to all writers who believe a speech should run two lines or not at all.

Patricia Neal and Kim Hunter are equally excellent as the pilloried school-marms, although the brunt of the emotional moments fall to Miss Neal. In this regard I have a minor query: why tip off in the first act the fact that Miss Neal has, indeed, an unnatural affection for Miss Hunter?

Iris Is Superb

As I remember the original production, this development came along later and was, I thought, an important plot point. It just seemed to me that in this present version she was rather too obviously frustrated from the start.

As the fiend-child Iris Mann is superb, a master of the ingenuous lie and the blood-curdling leer. And Katherine Emmet, the only remnant of the original cast, carries on gracefully as the beguiled grandmother.

Robert Pastene, the only major male in the cast, is reasonably sympathetic in the unhappy position of the guy whose girl gets caught in this horrible hassle.

"The Children's Hour" is a solid professional job throughout, written with skill, performed with competence. It is a gruesome, though welcome, addition to the season's line-up.

Daily Mirror

December 19, 1952

Children's Hour Revival A Spellbinder as in '34

By WALTER WINCHELL

(Little Miss Massacre)

Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour" was revived last night at the Coronet Theatre. It was originally offered at the Maxine Elliott on Nov. 20, 1934 and it spellbound dramagoers for 691 performances, nearly two years. Last night it strapped all of us tight to our seats again with its power. The Mirror reporter's report of the drama smash of 1934 is reprinted this morning because the only alterations necessary are a few names. Here it is.

A theme that once excited the law to action is handled with such good taste and restraint by Lillian Hellman at the Maxine Elliott Theatre (the Coronet) that her new and first play "The Children's Hour" probably will attract playgoers for a long, long run.

Patterned a little after "The Captive" and "Maedchen in Uniform," it spellbound the first audience with its incessant tenseness. It is produced by Herman Shumlin (Kermit Bloomgarden) with adroitness and skill.

This morning finds Miss Hellman (who has confined her craftsmanship to the magazines and Sunday newspapers) perched high on the pedestal because of her fine play. By all means go see it and enjoy three hours of intelligent drama.

She juggles the most delicate of the biological themes by revealing how a child shall mislead them. The Wright-Dobie School for Girls is operated by two pleasant young women, whose backers number Mrs. Tilford. Her granddaughter Mary, an incorrigible thing and poisonous cobra, evens matters with the tutors by spreading a lie.

The teachers are accused of an unnatural affection for each other. The pupil's state of mind spreads like typhoid throughout the town after the accused women take the matter to the libel court — demanding exoneration. Instead, to their amazement and heartbreak, the court accepts the brat's testimony, and the case and cause are lost.

The author then shows the decay and ruin of the innocent women. One takes her own life and the other must continue to be tortured by the scandal that never happened.

The cast is an honorable one. Not in a long time has so clever a group of players been assembled. There is no quarrel to pick with any of them. The outstanding performance, perhaps, is Florence McGee's (Iris Mann, 13, who devastated us all in "The Innocents") penetrating villainy. She makes you despise Mary Tilford (the sneak) and to despise a make-believe character takes considerable histrionics.

Anne Revere (Pat Neal last night), one of the teachers, who never realized her frailty until she had been accused of it, plays it so beautifully that her performance alone, one suspects, will be the talk of the playgoers and reviewers. She is star dust.

The others in the notable cast (last night) include Kim Hunter, Robert Pastene, Katherine Emmett (in the 1934 play, too), Janet Parker, Mary Finney, and Leora Thatcher. The supporting players include Nancy Plehn, Carolyn King, Sandra March, Denise Alexander, Toni Hallaran, June Connolly, Sandee Preston and Gordon Russell.

Miss Hellman staged it flawlessly. Howard Bay's sets are appropriate, Anna Hill Johnstone's apparel is ditto and Peter Glenn is co-producer.

Our 1934 review concluded: "Movie possibilities: Hardly." Mr. Samuel Goldwyn, however, put it on the screen as "These Three," and, of course, spoiled it.

"The Children's Hour," (18 years later) is still great drama. It should have won the Pulitzer medal (in 1935) but that "distinction" went to Zoe Akins' "The Old Maid," a flop.

A Dependable, Accurate Source of Information of the American Theatre

NEW YORK

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

"The Grey-Eyed People"

Journal American

December 18, 1952

Amiable Comedy But Not Notable

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN "The Grey-Eyed People," which opened at the Martin Beck Theatre last night, John D. Hess has taken an idea as old as Sophocles and developed it into a mild and occasionally bright drama of social revolt in present-day suburbia.

He is capable of writing good comedy, and his people operate according to a reasonably rational pattern; but he doesn't have much to say. Certainly nothing new.

We have all been made aware of the tragic injustices of small-town opinion. In this instance the victim is a guy who runs a puppet show and is about to be barred from performing for the kids of Sweet Hills, a commuter's community near New York, on the grounds that he was once a Communist.

Usual Characters

This situation invokes the usual characters: the young advertising executive who is a friend of the puppeteer and is not going to let his pal get pushed around; his boss, the lily-livered reactionary, who will fire him if he won't conform; the boss' wife, who is head of the Parent Teacher's Association; the hero's loyal ever-loving wife, and the customary two children, whose comical shenanigans have serious repercussions.

There also is another strange figure in the proceedings, the boss' mistress, who just happens to be visiting with the junior ad-man and his family.

I have nothing against this theme, whether written by Ibsen or Hess, but I think it loses much of its force when attacked with large blunt instruments. It does not seem at all feasible that anybody would make such a giant issue over an incident of such slight importance.

And I am terribly annoyed with this same Big Boss—the imbecile with all the money who will fire his brightest young employe merely because he once was a friend of a liberal. I have yet to meet one of these in the flesh, which is probably a stroke of good fortune.

Stars Again

It must nevertheless be recorded in black ink that Walter Matthau comes through with an utterly engaging and believable performance as the hero, the young huckster. He again establishes himself as one of our most formidable leading men.

Virginia Gilmore, after a long absence, returns to play his wife with charm and authority and Sandra Deel, as the boss' girl friend, manages to lure a lot of laughs and bring some credence to an unbelievable role.

Brandon Peters and Katherine Anderson, playing the tycoon and his wife, put up a game fight but are not entirely successful in rising above the improbable personalities created for them.

Tony Bickley is restrained and always competent as the accused Commie and naturally the two kids, Edward Brian and Michael Free, are simply wonderful. Proving, once more, that there are no BAD child actors.

"The Grey-Eyed People" provides an amiable evening, but it is neither novel nor notable.

"THE GREY-EYED PEOPLE"

Comedy by John D. Hess; staged by Morton Da Costa; setting by Eldon Elder; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by Albert Selden at the Martin Beck Theatre, December 17, 1952. The cast:

Delivery Man....John Randolph
Tommy Hart.....Edward Brian
Buster Hart.....Michael Free
Beatrice Hammond..Sandra Deel
Alice Hart....Virginia Gilmore
Barry Green.....Clay Flagg
John Hart.....Walter Matthau
Simon Blackwell..Brandon Peters
1st Girl Scout...Rosemary Prinz
2nd Girl Scout.....Sally Jessup
3rd Girl Scout.....
Mary Grace Canfield
Lucille Blackwell.....
Katherine Anderson
Buff Schneider...Walter Klavun
Richard Jones.....Tony Bickley
Policeman.....Ted Tiller
A Woman.....Jane Lloyd-Jones
Gates.....John Martone

New York Post

December 18, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Red Hysteria in a Suburban Town

It is so unexpected and refreshing to find a current play dealing with a topic of grave contemporary import that one is sorely tempted to be tolerant of the frailties of "The Grey-Eyed People," which opened last night at the Martin Beck. At least, the comedy by John D. Hess has the commendable virtue of looking with outraged liberal decency on the serious matter of the rise of political intolerance and hysteria in an American suburban town and of striving to say something sane, tolerant and enlightened concerning it.

Unfortunately, though, good intentions are no more sufficient in themselves in the theater than they are any place else. In his play, Mr. Hess, a radio and television writer, has attempted to do what James Thurber and Elliott Nugent did in "The Male Animal" and combine a serious liberal viewpoint with light and bantering comedy. It is a fine trick if you can work it, but it is apparently far more difficult than it might seem, and "The Grey-Eyed People"—a term that refers to the idealists of this world—manages the amalgamation only intermittently.

The author does begin with several advantages. In addition to a significant topic and a compassionate outlook, he has the ability to turn a good comic line upon occasion and to write scenes that reveal a sound sense of humorous observation. He is enormously helped, too, by a vigorous, skillful and vastly ingratiating performance in the leading role by the oncoming Walter Matthau, an actor who has the pleasant gift of being able to make the part he is playing seem considerably more interesting and well written than it actually is.

Yet, with all of these incidental merits, the final effect of "The Grey-Eyed People" is decidedly short of satisfying. Not only do the antics of two obstreperous children and the rather unnecessary and violent brawling of the play's husband and wife interfere seriously with entertainment, but the ending is so intermingled with sweetness and light that it seems to let the vital issue which Mr. Hess has raised drift away innocuously. It is good to know that the townspeople of Sweet Hills are basically sound, but it is shown pretty unconvincingly.

Mr. Hess' protagonist is a television writer who has moved his family to the suburban town of Sweet Hills but wants to stay away from the dull community activities. When, however, a visiting puppeteer, who has been barred from giving a show because he is an ex-Communist, turns out to be a friend of his school days, the writer goes to bat for him and is himself denounced as a Red. Here the dramatist has a lot of sound things to say about intolerance, but between his hero's sex problems and the pranks of the children, the issue proves to be not very serious, particularly when most of the citizenry rally unexpectedly to his defense.

Although Mr. Matthau dominates the proceedings with his deft forcefulness, there are other good performances, particularly by Virginia Gilmore as the wife, Sandra Deel as a predatory lady, Tony Bickley as the ex-Communist, Walter Klavun as a rough neighbor with a heart of gold, Katherine Anderson and Brandon Peters as the forces of intolerance, and John Randolph as a harried delivery man. "The Grey-Eyed People" starts out gamely to face its subject with bold liberalism, but it ends without force or the proper effectiveness.

The New York Times

December 18, 1952

John Hess' Comedy, 'The Grey-Eyed People,' Deals With Civil Liberties in the Suburbs

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In "The Grey-Eyed People," which opened at the Martin Beck last evening, John D. Hess has set the cause of civil liberties back twenty-five years. He has written a wise-cracking comedy about a community that boycotts a puppeteer who was a member of the Communist party from 1937-39. As things are constituted today, the problem of public tolerance of unpopular causes and people is a grave one, and it is interesting to find a professional TV writer who is willing to compose a play on that theme.

But "The Grey-Eyed People" is a suburban comedy written in an obsolete style calculated to make the suburbs, civil liberties, sex, nobility and the theatre equally objectionable. Mr. Hess has a sort of brash confidence in the efficacy of clever dialogue. He has a "line"; he can always find a gag for a crisis.

* * *

If Mr. Hess had nothing in mind except neighborhood pettiness or domestic tribulations, his superficial playwriting would no doubt seem tedious. But his breezy and glib interpolation of civil liberties in the middle of a suburban antic goes beyond simple tedium. There is an element of effrontery in it. It suggests that the cause of civil liberties will have to be protected from its friends.

Morton Da Costa, the director, has taken his cue from the author and staged the performance as if it were one long practical joke. As the representative of intellectual valor, Walter Matthau is never off the stage for more than a few moments, and he is talking all the time in a vein of manly mockery. Mr. Matthau, a black-haired, lunging gentleman, is a good actor who is likely to find himself in a good play sometime.

Virginia Gilmore as the irritable wife who rises to glory in the last scene, and Sandra Deel who never deviates from her devotion to sex help to round out Mr. Hess' portrait of human frailty. A lot of other actors run, and shout for their livelihood, including two boys in parts that are odious in every line and inflection.

Don't blame the actors: they didn't write the dialogue. Don't blame Eldon Elder who has designed a sturdy and agreeable living-room set. Mr. Hess will have to bear the blame for writing a silly comedy in a sophomoric style. He needs Ibsen for a collaborator.

Daily Mirror

December 18, 1952

'The Grey-Eyed People' Opens at the Beck

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Grey-Eyed People," which Albert Selden brought to the Martin Beck Theatre last evening, introduces a promising new playwright named John D. Hess. He pens amusing dialogue but has, we think, something yet to learn about characterization and construction.

What Hess has really written is the familiar story of the free and independent fellow who flouts convention, antagonizes the boss's wife and loses his job. But he has given it a twist by having the rebel do it all because he comes to the defense of an ex-Communist, an old college mate.

They had been "the grey-eyed people" in school, the dreamers, the idealists who expected something fine from the world, who snorted at reality. One became a radio and TV executive, the other a folk-singer and puppeteer. The latter also joined the Communist Party, attended a few meetings, was disillusioned and then forgot the matter.

But others wouldn't let him forget. They boycotted his performances, until the air exec found a small but sympathetic audience for him. And, contrary to the usual formula, the leader of the fight for what he thought tolerance and decency didn't get his job back.

The weakness in the script, in our opinion, is that the ex-Communist has never publicly disavowed his ties with the Stalinites. He is depicted as a lovable, gentle, starry-eyed humanitarian who has never heard about the class struggle, spy rings, sabotage and violence. Apparently he had never read the bitter Marx's "Das Kapital." He's too good to be true. And we couldn't believe in him for a moment.

Producer Selden has given the comedy-with-a-message the benefit of a first-rate cast. Walter Matthau is excellent as the rugged individualist. Virginia Gilmore is most attractive as his loyal, but conservative, wife. Sandra Deel is very effective as a sexy soap-opera researcher.

Tony Bickley, Katherine Anderson, Brandon Peters, Clay Flagg, John Randolph and Walter Klavun make the most of other assignments. Edward Brian and Michael Free contribute masterly impersonations of prankish brats, while Rosemary Prinz, Sally Jessup and Mary Grace Canfield click as an ungifted singing trio.

Eldon Elder and Noel Taylor merit salutes for the settings and costumes. Morton Da Costa directed the comedy sequences commendably, but failed to make the ideological episodes convincing.

"The Grey-Eyed People" is hilarious in spots. Hess has a flair for robust comedy. He can type a laugh line, fashion a ribald situation dextrously. But his aim is shaky when he takes to the soap-box. The cards are stacked too obviously for a hit. We have to mark our ballot "no."

Winchell says: "Not a bad first effort, but not a good one, either."

DAILY NEWS

December 18, 1952

'The Grey-Eyed People' a Mildly Entertaining Play About Liberty

By JOHN CHAPMAN

John D. Hess' play, "The Grey-Eyed People," which Albert Selden presented at the Martin Beck Theatre last evening, is a comedy about our various freedoms and rights, including one of the most important but least-mentioned blessings of our democracy—the freedom NOT to assemble. However, it's not much of a comedy, being pleasant but awkward.

At least since Ibsen wrote "An Enemy of the People" dramatists have been writing about the right of an individual to private opinion no matter what the pressure of public opinion may be. They have penned tragedies, dramas and comedies on the subject, and a very good current example of the comedy treatment is "The Male Animal." In comparison with this revival of a 1940 play, 1952's "The Grey-Eyed People" suffers. Its motives are good, some of its scenes and lines are quite funny and its cast is generally attractive, but last evening it wasn't strong enough to hold my attention.

Just Hates Joining.

In the play Walter Matthau is an advertising man who has moved into a New York suburb whose social and political life is dictated by the wife of his boss. An individualist—meaning that all he wants is to be let alone—Matthau resists the pressure being put on him to join the Men's Club and the Parent-Teachers Association. He specifically declines to attend a meeting of the P-TA to protest the appearance of a children's entertainer, a puppeteer, because the entertainer has been labeled a Communist.

It turns out that this chap, a mild and likable sort, is an old friend of Matthau's—and was, indeed, a party member years ago when he was 23 years old and didn't know any better. Even though he has renounced Communism, this fellow has been labeled a red and his pickings as an entertainer are slim. What little conflict there is in "The Grey-Eyed People" concerns the advertising man's defiance of the community and his boss by hiring the blacklisted puppeteer to put on a show in his own back yard.

Better Luck Next Time.

Henrik Ibsen, James Thurber and Elliott Nugent, to name three, have done better at this kind of thing than has Hess, Hess, however, does manage some nice humor about family life in Suburbia and quite a few sharp laugh-lines. Matthau, always a competent actor, does well with his role, and Virginia Gilmore plays the rather confused part of his wife attractively.

There also are pleasant performances by friends and neighbors, including Sandra Deel, Brandon Peters, Katherine Anderson, Walter Klavun and—as the blacklisted victim—Tony Bickley. Eldon Elder has built a nice house for the play—and I think Hess has enough stuff to build a better play the next time he writes one.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 18, 1952

Smoke Gets in Grey Eyes

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Grey-Eyed People" represents one of the bravest outbursts of new talent in recent theatrical years. The play sets out to discuss the most controversial aspect of postwar American social life on terms illuminated by uproarious comedy.

John D. Hess, the playwright, has succeeded admirably in his manner, his method, his humor, and above all, his characters. Where he has let himself down, and his efforts out the window, is in the building on a strong premise but toward no conclusion. He ends up inconclusively, settling lots of things, but not the questions he first posed.

Hero Is Writer.

His subject is the attitude of an average suburban community toward a man accused of Communist sympathies. Clearly inspired by the Draper-Adler case, the play tells of a marionette operator who has appeared on lists of subversives, and the indignant outbursts of the self-righteous who try to prevent his appearance.

The hero of the play is a television writer, a good guy of rich humor and live-and-let-live tendencies. The wife of his boss has tried to involve him in her condemnation of the entertainer, but he is all for laissez faire, even after he discovers that the puppeteer is an old and very good friend of his.

The man with the talking dolls reminds him of their youthful quest for "grey-eyed people", the "sweet elite" who were honest in loving life, and laughed so well. But the writer only really gets angry when a rock is pitched through his window. From then on he is a staunch supporter of his friend, who privately confesses his brief youthful and disillusioned pursuit of communism.

Romantic Complications.

There are romantic complications through all this, particularly between the hero and a majestically outspoken dame who writes with him.

The richness of character comedy is bountiful, a real delight as it springs fresh and titillating from the honest nature of the people involved. For most of the way the play has power, almost like "An Enemy of the People" with rousing legitimate laughs.

Then, in the end, the author starts saying none of his major issues was really there. The Babbitty neighbors develop sense of humor and modest loyalty, the love affairs are revealed as more talk than action, the broken window is a shattered controversy and the emergency performance is rained out.

Well-Acted Show.

It is also treated as a solution that the hero is left without a job, and the officious troublemaker will go right on seeing her vindictive duty and attending to it.

You may find the momentum of the first two acts striking and witty enough to carry the evening, at least until you have time to think it over. The show is awfully well produced, tightly, sensitively directed in a most believable set, and very well acted.

Walter Matthau, who gets visibly stronger with each new play, is fine as the tempestuous hero, big in style without looking overexaggerated in manner, and fine at timing.

Sandra Deel is a grand surprise, as she turns from musicals to deftly play the menace here, with smooth composure and placid optimism about the male sex. It is a fresh character, neatly played.

Virginia Gilmore gets her chief innings early in the play, but is sturdy in the character of the wife. Tony Bickley is gentle as the puppeteer, and Clay Flagg and Walter Klavun are fine neighbors. Katherine Anderson and Brandon Peters make the boss and wife humorless but believable, while Edward Brian and Michael Free are terrifyingly efficient as the hero's young sons.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 18, 1952

'The Grey-Eyed People'

By WALTER F. KERR

JOHN D. HESS, author of last night's new entry at the Martin Beck, is a television writer who has quite clearly become concerned with the illiberal pressures, the amateur witch-hunting, now beleaguering the various entertainment fields. In "The Grey Eyed People" he introduces us to a TV executive torn between loyalty to a friend whose "name is on a list" and his own survival in an industry that wants him to toe a strictly non-controversial line. The theme is contemporary, the point of view valid, the story-line charged with all sorts of possible theatrical excitement.

The trouble with Mr. Hess, I'd say, is that he is still a television writer. Having lived next door to those rich, juicy commercials for so long, and having soaked up a good bit of that "life can be beautiful" approach to fairly disturbing matters, he is unable to speak his piece with any candor, with any directness. His material must be sugar-coated, laced with distracting and disarming gags, and the result is a curiously indigestible compound of message and ordinary monkeyshines.

* * *

Smack in the middle of a heated battle over the right of a former Communist to earn his living as a puppeteer, we are treated to the low-farce business of having three horrendous Girl Scouts march into a suburban living room, harmonize on a neighborly carol, and depart mugging. A further quarrel is interrupted by the arrival of the local volunteer fire department, out on a false alarm. The climax of the second act calls for the play's impassioned hero to knock down one of his neighbors, then quickly drop to his knees and ask him a favor.

The fact that a few of these excursions into the irrelevant are funny hurts more than it helps. Not only the mood of the play becomes addled—the meaning does. Characters are everlastingly trying to pull the piece back into shape by snorting "This isn't a thing to make jokes about any more" or sternly asking "What's so funny about Communism?" But the author is either too gag-happy or too self-conscious about the controversial stuff he has chosen to tangle with to stay in any one vein very long.

* * *

When he does manage to get to the point, he is mildly impressive. Tony Bickley, as the harassed entertainer who is about to be run out of town, has a moment of quiet self-explanation which stirs a little interest, a shade of sympathy. And Walter Matthau brings sudden authority to the inevitable scene in which a shilly-shallying father finds that his own children are being damaged by his social indifference. But these moments are few and far between, and we are back to jokes about spiking the punch bowl in an awful—and slightly apologetic—hurry.

If any one could make the whole difficult mixture palatable, Walter Matthau could. This reliable actor is in his best form, engaging in his embarrassment at being caught playing nonsensical games with his children, sardonically funny in the business of brushing off a too amorous writer of soap operas carefully restrained in the overblown sentimentality of a rosily optimistic last act.

Virginia Gilmore, attractive as always, has little to do but huffily stir up some uncomfortably forced family spats. Sandra Deel, as a script writer whose principal interest in the American Legion is more or less erotic, gets a little fun out of a mismanaged attempt at seducing the play's much too busy hero. Eldon Elder has contributed an attractive setting: one of those brand new suburban homes, scrubbed and piney. But Morton da Costa's stage direction does not suggest that this Westchester family is ever going to get comfortable in it. The people move nervously and not a little vaguely through the script's indeterminate moods, and the dour lighting rather reinforces the eerie suggestion that all and sundry have been caught unawares during the second week of rehearsal.

"Two's Company"

The New York Times

December 16, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After encountering more trouble than should be visited on any human being, Bette Davis has turned up in "Two's Company," which opened at the Alvin Theatre last evening. She is in good spirits and she gives a willing performance as the star of a Broadway revue. But Miss Davis, one of the most brilliant of the Hollywood stars, has not had much experience in the rough-and-tumble of stage acting. It is to be feared that her performing is never much more than adequate. She is never going to look back on this as the most glamorous episode in her professional life.

* * *

John Murray Anderson, the genius of the musical revue, has made "Two's Company" look keen and elegant. The attractive and inventive scenery that Ralph Alswang has designed and the beautiful costumes that Miles White has put together give "Two's Company" the appearance of a thoroughbred. Every now and then Jerome Robbins and Nora Kaye collaborate on a humorous or a macabre ballet, and then "Two's Company" has the wizardry of first-rate revue art. For as a group ballet dancers have more flair for the revue stage than most performers, especially if Vernon Duke and Ogden Nash are calling the tunes and lyrics. Like the revue as a whole, the music is uneven. But Mr. Duke never lets a ballet down, and Mr. Nash always has a word for it that is pithy or humorous.

* * *

Among those also present and in good form is Hiram Sherman, looking droll and innocent, wearing for his entrance his usual blue serge suit. No one has had wit enough to give Mr. Sherman good material for every appearance. But he and the rest of us should be grateful to Sheldon Harnick who wrote a satirical ballad about a Frank Lloyd Wright house that blends so well into the landscape that no one can find it. Mr. Sherman gives this number his best aplomb.

Let's be grateful also to Arnold B. Horwitt and Lee Rogow for a hilarious sketch about a veteran stage star who tries to keep a child actor from stealing his scenes. David Burns, always a good man in the grand style of burlesque, is immensely funny in this capital sketch. As a matter of fact, he is funny every time he shoves his map across the stage.

Miss Davis appears first as the minstrel of "Turn Me Loose on Broadway," a conventional number in which Mr. Duke and Mr. Nash express a trite devotion to show business. She is a kitchen slattern in a sketch with Mr. Burns; she is Tallulah breaking up the première of a Bette Davis film; she is Sadie Thompson, a hill-billy singer, an amorous American actress in Rome, and a singer of blues in the last scene but one.

A professional actress, Miss Davis knows how to project her celebrated personality across the footlights, and her voice is resonant enough for the theatre. But no one should be surprised to discover that her severe performing is on the elementary side—colorless and monotonous. She has never had a chance to learn the sharp techniques of music hall acting.

* * *

"Two's Company" has moments of gaiety and vitality. Make a note of Oliver Wakefield's amusing parody of a British political address. Don't overlook the eerie drumming of "The Teen Aces" or the wild, raffish dancing of Maria Karnilova and Buzz Miller in a Mexican antic. They are show business in the modern idiom. But the good things come only at intervals in a handsome production that has mediocre spots all through the evening and that does not make use of Miss Davis' best talents.

"TWO'S COMPANY"

Revue with music by Vernon Duke; lyrics by Ogden Nash; sketches by Charles Sherman and Peter De-Vries; additional lyrics by Sammy Cahn; additional sketches by Mort Green and George Foster, Arnold Horwitt and Lee Rogow and Nat Hiken and Billy Friedberg; sketches staged by Jules Dassin; dances and musical numbers staged by Jerome Robbins; entire production under the supervision of John Murray Anderson; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Miles White; musical conductor, Milton Rosenstock; presented by James Russo and Michael Ellis at the Alvin Theatre, December 15, 1952, with the following cast: Bette Davis, Hiram Sherman, David Burns, Bill Callahan, Stanley Prager, Ellen Hanley, George Irving, Maria Karnilova, Buzz Miller, Oliver Wakefield, Peter Kelley, Robert Orten's Teen Aces and Nora Kaye.

Journal-American

December 16, 1952

It Isn't Momentous But It Will Last

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE UNVEILING of any big musical is always a glamorous and exciting event in our town and last night "Two's Company," which came to the Alvin Theatre after all these weeks, promised even more.

It had Bette Davis, as star; it had suffered a series of misadventures which provoked daily publicity throughout the land; it had been re-written and re-directed by everybody from John Greenleaf Whittier to John Murray Anderson, and until curtain time you could get odds of 5-to-2 that it might never open in New York.

But it did.

It is neither the most hilarious or tuneful or decorative revue you've ever seen; Bette Davis is not going to revolutionize the world of musical extravaganzas either as songstress or commedienne, yet "Two's Company" succeeds, by and large, in giving the customers a load of entertainment and laughs for their lucre.

Good Score

It has a good score, occasionally a notable one, by Vernon Duke and Ogden Nash (mostly); it has a couple of truly stimulating ballet numbers, and there are a few sketches as funny as any in recent seasons.

The dancers are uniformly agile and well-schooled, the dolls are decorative, Milton Rosenstock's pit band is good and loud and authoritative, the whole thing moves mellifluously (he means—it moves), and it is luxuriantly mounted. What else do you want?

Well, you could use better material for Bette Davis, which has probably been the trouble from the first. Okay, you've got a big movie star, but it isn't enough to dress her in various incongruous costumes and toss her out in front of the lights.

Sure, she looks like Tallulah, but she doesn't stay as funny as Tallulah for very long; naturally, it's going to be funny, temporarily, to see her as the frowsy wife of an insanely jealous husband, and she might even score heavily with the Sadie Thompson bit if she sang or danced very well on her own.

Through all this one has the feeling that somebody decided it was enough just to see the great Davis having a field day. Mebbe so, but I think they should have given her a better basket lunch.

The one number she delivered with her memorable emotional drive was something they wisely saved for closing called "Just Like a Man." This is the metier she understands and has built into a career; here she is unsurpassed and needs no big voice or trick ending.

He's Enchanted

Providing some sort of vehicle to carry her through her many changes was obviously a challenge to the boys who took a hack at it these many moons—and they have done reasonably well.

The funniest sketch in the show is the first one, in which Miss Davis doesn't appear. It is the story of a monstrous ham, his realization that he is to be cast with a child actor, and his subsequent efforts not to let the little monster steal his scenes. For this, Michael Mann and David Burns should be cited.

There also are good singing and dancing moments by Bill Callahan and Nora Kaye, especially during a ballet somewhat reminiscent of "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue"—this one entitled "Haunted Hot Spot." And I was personally enchanted by both the music and the performance of "Esther," featuring Maria Karnilova, the same David Burns and Buzz Miller.

Between these interludes there are many other musical numbers, a single by Oliver Wakefield not too unlike the one he has been delivering lo, these past 20 years, and the entire proceedings ingratiatingly and competently presided over by Hiram Sherman. This has always struck me as a most unrewarding chore—the M. C. of proceedings featuring a Great Name, but I think Sherman comes off wonderfully well.

"Two's Company" is not a momentous musical, but there are many things to be said in its favor. I think it will probably last as long as its leading lady's larynx.

New York Post

December 16, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Arrival of the Bette Davis Revue

Since a true story with a happy ending would be welcome on Broadway these days, it would be pleasant to be able to report that "Two's Company," which has had so much trouble on its preliminary road tour, turned out to be a smash on the occasion of its opening at the Alvin Theater last night. But I'm afraid I can't do so. The revue starring the eminent Hollywood hierarch, Bette Davis, proved to be, despite all the work that has been done on it, a curiously clumsy and inept entertainment, for all the striving of Miss Davis and her hard-working associates.

It certainly seemed to have a good head start toward success. Vernon Duke, a talented composer, did the score, and Ogden Nash, the creator of an entire new school of light verse, wrote the lyrics. Prominent among the supporting cast are Hiram Sherman, one of the most brilliant and imaginative light comedians in America, and David Burns, who is always a welcome low comic. And Miss Davis, in addition to being a celebrated cinema Bernhardt, has the astringent sort of humor about her that a musical revue can use. I think much more should have resulted from their activities.

Miss Davis

Let it be said for Miss Davis that she works diligently, valiantly and modestly. I can't feel that she is exactly triumphant as either a comedienne or a singer, but she has an air of sincere desire to please that is entirely engaging. She seems happiest when she is donning outlandish costumes and making herself look grotesque, but that isn't when she seems to me best. I hope she really doesn't hate Tallulah Bankhead, because she owes her a debt of gratitude, since she is most entertaining when parodying that strenuous lady's blitzkrieg tactics.

There are at least two sketches in "Two's Company" that struck me as successful. In one, Miss Davis is Miss Bankhead misbehaving flagrantly at a Bette Davis performance, if you follow me, and in the other David Burns and a child actor play with great sincerity two performers trying to steal the show from each other. The other comedy interludes impressed me as almost completely lacking in hilarity, and I thought they wasted the enormous talent of Mr. Sherman, who requires only the chance to chat at length with his audience to be incomparable.

Some Contributors

Jerome Robbins has staged some imaginative if, to me, on the whole fairly cryptic ballet numbers, which are considerably aided by the vigorous dancing of Nora Kaye, Bill Callahan, Maria Karnilova and Buzz Miller. The sets by Ralph Alswang and the costumes by Miles White are likewise of assistance to the evening, but neither the songs by Mr. Duke nor the lyrics by Mr. Nash are in any way worthy of the capacity of these accomplished gentlemen. Incidentally, the sketch about the warring thespians is by Arnold B. Horwit and Lee Rogow.

Miss Davis and the two comedians, in addition to the dancers, heroically carry on the chief tasks of the evening, but things are helped by the good looks of two young singers, Ellen Hanley and Sue Hight, a beautiful girl who looks like Jinx Falkenberg, which is no handicap to any woman's attractiveness. I didn't find many matters in the show as distressing as the monologue by an English comedian named Oliver Wakefield, but it did seem to me that all of the songs and most of the sketches were an insurmountable handicap to Miss Davis' return to the stage.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 16, 1952

Bette Rises to Challenge of 'Two's Company'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Well, Bette Davis finally made it, with characteristic explosiveness.

"Two's Company" opened last night with such hysteria as Broadway has not seen in years. Before the first blare of a trumpet the audience was tense with nerves and curiosity. The show's turbulent history had first nighters panicky, and bug-eyed as the star.

If Miss Davis started the night feeling winged things in her tummy, she ended looking more like the cat who dined on canaries. For she and her companions had had the crowd literally bellowing encouragement over and over through the performance.

Applause for Courage.

It honestly must be said that in the case of the star, the howling was sometimes more in honor of her courage than her adeptness in the world of musical revue. Her dancing is likely to consist of hip rolls, marching, and none too steady lifts by a whole corps of male partners. Her singing is deep, husky, very articulate and rhythmic, but not very musical. In sketches she can do almost anything better than whip off a laugh line.

But "Two's Company" is a triumph of personality and will power. Miss Davis is electric, as she has always been on the screen. Now, more than ever, she is not only anxious that you like her. She is grimly determined that you shall, and you will.

Her goal is to give you a memorable evening. She will try on all the funny hats and shoes, black out her teeth, tell bathroom jokes and stand on her head if asked. Somewhere along the line you are dazzled, and in the end awed.

New Hair-Do.

Miss Davis has a new coif, a slick boyish bob in front, with a row of curled-up bangs, like a short page boy, across the back of her neck. She is replete with wigs and enough changes of costume to wear out the ordinary woman before the intermission.

About the middle of the first act she does a creditable imitation of Tallulah Bankhead, in which every Davis trade mark, foible or vulnerability is carefully spotlighted with disdain. The redoubtable character passes out copies of "Tallulah" in book form to an audience supposedly devoted to watching Bette Davis.

The star indulges in a sinister sketch in which she portrays a sluttish drudge admired by a low comedy husband. The sketch is inclined to make you laugh purely with nervous surprise that anyone of Bette Davis' stature would make herself look like such a hag.

Sadie Thompson Role.

In a stage full of dancers, with everyone dressed in extravagant color, the star sings and parades through a Sadie Thompson routine. It must be the shameless way she wants to be liked in it that makes both her and it seem glamorous.

Toward the finish Miss Davis even indulges in a torch song, but its mood is fickle, and it is interesting chiefly because of her power to sustain the number.

Whatever the idiosyncrasies of Miss Davis as a revue star, there is no question about her displacement as a theatrical figure. The pressure rises when she is around, and it is all the more remarkable because she is so unlikely a talent for this world of high kicks and warbles.

You may suspect that it has never crossed Bette Davis' mind that Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, Marilyn Miller or Gertrude Lawrence ever did anything she cannot do as well. This naive and humorless faith is both endearing and awesome. Want any mountains moved?

"Two's Company" is a richly colored, not always tasteful, loud and fast affair, with a first-rate company to support the star. Nora Kaye is downright brilliant in "Haunted Hotspot," haunting in "Roundabout," and bright as a button in her comedy. She got much deserved ovations, as did Maria Karnilova for her daring, humorous "Esther."

Hiram Sherman gives the show valued continuity with his delightful introductions, and frequently abets Miss Davis in her comic sketches. He even sings, with happy effect, about modern houses.

David Burns is in fine style, squelching a child actor, being overcome by a movie actress, or imitating various backwoodsmen of many nations. This is the kind of show that has at least two and sometimes three of everything. Bill Callahan burns the floor with his sprightly dances, and Ellen Hanley does some lovely singing.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 16, 1952

'Two's Company'

By WALTER F. KERR

IT'S always fun to see a distinguished actress unbend, and in "Two's Company," which opened at the Alvin Monday, Bette Davis unbends all over the place. She trucks right out and lets herself be tossed into the air by four or five chorus boys. She ties an old bandana around her hair, drapes herself in a moth-eaten sweater, and slouches in sneakers through a sketch about tenement passion. She all but strangles herself in beads and boas, while she wriggles her hips through a parody of "Rain." She blacks out her teeth, jams a corncob pipe in her mouth and lets loose with the yowls of a hillbilly ballad. Indeed, Miss Davis unbends so much that there's some doubt in my mind whether she'll ever be able to straighten up again.

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The trouble with this business of encouraging a serious performer to let her hair down, climb off that Hollywood pedestal, and rough it up with the lowbrow comics is that it all adds up to a single joke, and the same one. Unless the performer has hitherto unsuspected and thoroughly genuine talents of the music-hall sort —which Miss Davis would not seem to possess—the descent from Parnassus thins out into a stunt, eminently suitable for parties alongside the family swimming pool but hardly the stuff with which to sustain an entire theatrical evening. It's a lot like listening to Beethoven's Fifth played on a pocket comb. You marvel that it can be done at all. And five minutes is just about enough of it.

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In all fairness to Miss Davis, it must be said that she is not only magnificently willing, she is also —from time to time—able enough. She has at Tallulah Bankhead with a good bit of zest and some accuracy. When she must adopt a southern accent for a sketch about predatory film females, or a British one for the familiar quip about Noel Coward's cryptic dialogue, she is a thoroughly workmanlike performer. And it must also be said that she gets not a trace of help from her material.

The eight or nine sketches by eight or nine writers are almost uniformly lame. Bringing up the matter of Noel Coward again, it should be possible to do better than "Men are like tires—they should be regularly poked." Surely somebody should have been able to find a point of view for the fairly old-hat "Sadie Thompson" parody, something reasonably fresh to say about folk-singers, something else to do with the Italian motion picture director, here called Strombolini, than simply have him wilt before the lass he intended as prey.

Nor are the comedy lyrics much brighter. Hiram Sherman, the easiest and most amiable of the evening's laboring clowns, does a masterful job of letting you take or leave a stubbornly unfunny ballad called "A Man's Home." Mr. Sherman does not undersell, or apologize, for the number. Neither does he beat you to death in an effort to make you like it. He simply delivers it, in pleasant, mannerly fashion, and retires with his integrity intact. Mr. Sherman has a few funny moments here and there—none is nicer than his introduction to the evening—and another valiant comedian, David Burns, accounts for occasional spontaneous laughter. But it's a superhuman struggle most of the way.

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Actually, there are some very attractive things in "Two's Company," though none of them have much to do with the evening's comedy. There are two stunning dances created by Jerome Robbins. In the first of these, "Roundabout," Nora Kaye moves exquisitely through a bit of fashionable romance under the chandeliers conceived in the pattern of children's games. In the second, "Haunted Hotspot," Miss Kaye electrifies the theater as she drives her way through a simple account of the torrid and tragic affair which led to the haunting of a nightclub.

And designer Ralph Alswang has clearly done his most striking work to date. There are half a dozen fetching backdrops: a nest of suburban cottages, a steamy tenement kitchen, a trio of tilting Manhattan towers against a rainy sky. The show at the Alvin is always handsome, it shoots off sparks when Jerome Robbins is in charge, and the over-all pacing has been neatly managed by John Murray Anderson. If Miss Davis and her writers were as brilliant as they are brave, it might be a more consistently joyous entertainment.

Daily Mirror

December 16, 1952

Bette Davis Delightful In 'Two's Company'

By WALTER WINCHELL

(Bette Late Than, etc.)

Before "Two's Company" arrived at the Alvin Theatre last night (after considerable polishing, doctoring, rehearsing and other changes), the reports about the new revue and its star, Bette Davis, were disconcerting. The premiere spectators however, found nearly all of it and Miss Davis delightfully entertaining, brisk and gay.

"Two's Company" is authored by an army of accredited people, such as Vernon Duke (music), Ogden Nash (words), Charles Sherman and Peter Devries (sketches) and Jerome Robbins (hoofing). John Murray Anderson supervised the production, which is sponsored by James Russo and Michael Ellis, representing a reported 151 backers.

But it is Bette Davis (making her debut behind Broadway footlights) whose versatility and clowning (and other make-believing) dominates the fun. The Mirror's observer relished nearly every moment she was on.

She met the challenge the way good troupers meet it from the moment she conquered her fears of the ogres out front, all of whom embraced her tightly with an affectionate welcome-to-town reception.

That demonstration must have drowned forever whatever apprehension she suffered about those "cold New York first-nighters." They loved her and her courage and her talent.

Miss Davis is enjoyable most when she is poking fun at herself, Miss Bankhead, Miss Bergman and Roberto in very amusing skits. She is immense when she toys with a torch sonnet (just before the finale) and when she is the target for her husband's dementia in a rollicking playlet called "Jealousy" from the funnybones of Nathaniel Hiken and William Friedberg. This was the hilarious sketch that Davistated this correspondent.

Oh, there are other exceptional people in this new show, especially Hiram Sherman (the Big in Big Time); David Burns (haw!); Maria Karnilova, Bill Callahan and Nora Kaye, the latter three delighting with their grand terpsichore. Miss Karnilova and Miss Kaye were so very entertaining they were rewarded with a bow each.

The music by Mr. Duke is always agreeable and alive, but we do not think he has one tune in this score you will whistle or recall. It really doesn't matter. Mr. Nash's lyrics are catchier. The choralists are good, the "One-a-Crowd" episode is excellent, the "Roundabout" ballet is another highspot; so is "Roll Along Sadie" (Thompson) and another very funny sketch is "And A Little Child" in which Burns left us in stitches. Lee Rogow and Arnold B. Horwitt collaborated on this one.

Sammy Cahn contributed additional lyrics. Miles White's costuming (as usual) is attractive; the scenery and illumination by Ralph Alswang is herewith appreciated and Peter Kelley, Deborah Remsen and Sue Hight thrush agreeably.

There are other credits, but the manager at Western Union was irritable and busy, and that cost us at least two and a half minutes, which robbed the actors (who might have enjoyed a pattycake or two) of seeing their talent saluted this morning.

At any rate—pod'n this haste (to catch up with a final edition) —"Two's Company" is my kind of a solid evening's entertainment, except for two bits that could be dropped and never missed. One is the hill-billy thing (next to closing) that slowed down the pace for the second time after the asbestos lifted. Two "stage-waits" are unimportant.

"Two's Company" is show-bizzy —the sort of two-a-day vaudeville the Palace audiences knew.

See Bette Davis shake the shimmy and wiggle her wiggle section. See Bette Davis, the Hollywood star, steal the top scenes again. See Bette Davis and her delightful cast at the Alvin.

The breeziest revue in town.

DAILY NEWS

December 16, 1952

Bette Davis Cheerful and Willing In a Limp Revue, 'Two's Company'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A man named Eisenhower got all the way to Korea and out of there without anybody knowing about it because the newspapers helped keep the secret. It's been different with BETTE DAVIS. Everybody must know about her, so I'm not blabbing when I report that BETTE DAVIS appeared at the Alvin Theatre last evening in a revue, "Two's Company."

I never did find out who the other one of the two mentioned in the title was, but BETTE DAVIS (that's the way they spell her nine times in the program) does have with her a few upper & lower case entertainers like Hiram Sherman, David Burns, Nora Kaye, Bill Callahan, Maria Karnilova and Buzz Miller. She also has with her a number of songs and sketches which are mostly lower case.

As a matter of fact, Miss Davis and her playmates are better than the show. She begins the evening amiably by burlesquing the typical musical comedy heroine, and from there she burlesques practically everybody, including Tallulah Bankhead. She is a slattern in a typical Arthur Miller love scene, with Burns playing her athletic spouse. She is a visual fright with a blacked-out tooth as the leader of a hillbilly choir on TV. She is nicely turned out and very-very as a Noel Coward comedienne and a tropical tramp as Sadie Thompson.

Handsome Decor.

Miss Davis works hard and amiably, and no doubt she will sing better when the laryngitis which has plagued her and all newspapers readers subsides. Her show is handsomely and cleverly set and lighted by Ralph Alswang and Miles White's costumes are pretty. But sets, costumes and a talented supporting cast are not enough to make a revue. Songs and jokes are needed.

Miss D. has one good joke—about have you noticed how pushy the rich are getting since Eisenhower was elected. But so far as my ear could detect, there aren't any songs, even though Vernon Duke and Ogden Nash are credited with some. The final Davis solo, "Just Like a Man," sounds like a burlesque of a song titled "Just Like a Man." There is one funny sketch in which a ham actor, Mr. Burns, gets into competition with a scene-stealing moppet, Michael Mann. This bit is by Arnold Horwitt and Lee Rogow.

Many Jokes and Writers.

Other contributors of material include Charles Sherman, Peter Devries, Sammy Cahn, Nat Hiken, Billy Friedberg, Sheldon Harnick, Mort Green, George Foster, Horton Foote and Oliver Wakefield—certainly quite a crowd to write something so simply titled "Two's Company."

The dancing, by Miss Kaye, Callahan and Miss Karnilova is very good, and Miss Kaye can be funny as well as classical. The sketches all have amusing basic ideas, but few of them come off as briskly as a revue sketch should. The show seems to be a triumph of matter over mind.

"Whistler's Grandmother"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 12, 1952

Strong Hull, Weak 'Whistler'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It would take a mighty bad play to keep Josephine Hull from presenting an amusing evening in the theater, and "Whistler's Grandmother" almost succeeds.

In the second act, though, she has what amounts to a long monologue, about an ideal home she is imagining. Purely because of her own warmth and charm, and her remarkable gift for sounding spontaneous, this passage is agreeable to listen to.

There are other isolated moments when she makes enchanting humor out of off-beat ideas. When she reels across a bar room, to her own astonishment, to toast, with her mug of beer, "love in Moosejaw," the whole idea of a life-loving old girl begins to seem very promising.

Later on when she properly demands that her impromptu family quit eating until grace has been said, then pops her eyes in horror as she realizes she knows nothing appropriate to say, all make a delightful moment.

But aside from these touches, this work has hardly enough material for a one-act play. It simply has no conflict, until the last 20 minutes or so, and this is alleviated at the playwright's capricious convenience.

The story of an elderly woman who tries to create a family background for a boy whose girl wants security is a good enough dramatic premise for comedy. But the writing is neither fresh nor strong, and the direction gives it no life.

Aside from Miss Hull, the other actors try wilfully to make something of the operation, but they have little material and their efforts are pretty uniformly doomed.

"WHISTLER'S GRANDMOTHER"

Comedy by Robert Finch; staged by Eugene O'Sullivan; settings by Leo Kerz; presented by Anthony Parella at the President Theatre, December 11, 1952. The cast:

Eddie.....Lonny Chapman
Nick.....Dick Bernie
Lute.....Alan Carney
Sam.....Lou Gilbert
Joy.....Peggy Nelson
Kate.....Josephine Hull
Mr. Carruthers.....
William Podmore

The New York Times

December 12, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Josephine Hull, Phi Beta Kappa (Radcliffe), and a sweetheart, is playing the part of a benign fraud in Robert Finch's "Whistler's Grandmother," which was put on at the President last evening. By being motherly and protective, she persuades some crumb-bums that she is a fine old lady in a fine old family, and they love the home she has created. Eventually they learn that she is common clay. But they like the lie better than the reality. In the last scene they settle down happily to pretending that they are all her chickens. For they know that, whatever the exact truth may be about her antecedents, she is a fine lady with a heart of gold who has a natural genius for home-making.

* * *

These lines are written by one theatregoer who feels that Mrs. Hull does the same thing to the play that the home-maker does to other characters. Mr. Finch's comedy begins about as awkwardly as a play can. He is all thumbs as a playwright; his ideas are threadbare; his sense of humor is feeble, and he seems to have no facility as a writer.

William J. Locke or Booth Tarkington might have written the play, but Mr. Finch can hardly get the framework nailed together. And the performance is no better. In the direction Eugene O'Sullivan has matched Mr. Finch by emphasizing the things that are awkward, obvious and mechanical.

But by the time the third act comes round, by golly, something is happening. The whole hocus-pocus looks wistfully plausible and desirable. By this time, Mrs. Hull has her family of barflies and chiselers hanging on her words, looking with love into her innocent eyes, washing dishes, making beds, rebuking anyone who uses rough language, radiating contentment. She totters around the stage with an apologetic air. She sits over her knitting, looking anxious and bewildered; and she prattles away in a homey voice about nonsensical matters. She listens with sincerity; she speaks with patience and authority. Whistler's grandmother was not half so endearing.

* * *

By this time the characters have come to believe what Mrs. Hull is saying; and a theatregoer may find himself believing it, too. Everybody should live in a home presided over by Mrs. Hull. It would wipe out crime, increase industry, sweeten society and fill the churches on Sunday.

What Mrs. Hull needs is a playwright half as sublime as she is. Mr. Finch is not in that class.

Daily Mirror

December 12, 1952

'Whistler's Grandmother' Is Well-Meaning Bore

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It would be easy to wisecrack about "Whistler's Grandmother," which Anthony Parella opened at the President Theatre last evening. The obvious thing would be to remark that a small turkey, left over from Thanksgiving, popped up when we were already surfeited with the bird. But it wouldn't be fair.

Too many good intentions—even though the road to that place is paved with them—have gone into the new arrival. It is a well-meaning bore, but some nice things should be said about it. Robert Finch, for instance, started with an amusing idea, and then didn't know what to do with it.

Finch is concerned with a nice young ginmill proprietor who is in love with a nice, dreamy girl. The latter has not had a happy home life. And her career as a small-time hoofer has been less than rewarding, so she wants to escape to the simplicity and security of wedded bliss in a little white cottage in the country.

Eddie, however, has other ideas. He likes the friendly atmosphere of his saloon and the bustle of the city streets. So he seeks a compromise. He engages an amiable old tippler to pose as his grandmother, and to bring old-fashioned charm to his dumpy quarters behind the bistro.

With that start, Finch could have given us a pleasant and warming little comedy. But he has failed to mix his ingredients with satisfactory skill and invention. In fact, he has skimped on the elements. He has underwritten almost every scene. He gained the attention of his audience momentarily and then lost it quickly.

What hurts us most about "Whistler's Grandmother" is that it betrays our darling Josephine Hull. She struggles nobly, brings all her resource and ingratiating personality to the phony grandmother. But even this wonderful trouper is not able to do much with the sketchy role.

Lonny Chapman, Peggy Nelson, Dick Bernie, Alan Carney, Lou Gilbert and William Podmore—likable troupers all—are trapped, too, in other unconquerable assignments.

Leo Kerz, who seems to be scenic designer in residence at the President, has done a remarkably good job with the settings, in view of the house's cramped stage. And director Eugene O'Sullivan has gotten more out of the script than Finch put into it.

Parella is an enterprising, venturesome producer. He is seeking to give hearings at the President to plays denied them elsewhere along Broadway. He is constantly encouraging new talent. He deserves our respect. We can only regret that his efforts, have brought tribulations, so far, rather than triumphs.

New York Post

December 12, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Sad Evening With Josephine Hull

Josephine Hull is everybody's heroine, but she put her rapturous admirers to a cruel test at the President Theater last night. She was appearing in the title role of a pathetic little atrocity called "Whistler's Grandmother," the work of an hitherto blameless author named Robert Finch, and it is the grimmest proof of how dismal the entire ill-fated enterprise was that even this delightful actress came perilously close to being a bore.

It certainly wasn't her fault. Playing a bibulous, imaginative and friendly old girl, who poses as the grandmother of a young saloon-keeper to give him the bucolic background necessary to impress his home-loving sweetheart, Mrs. Hull acted away with all of her customary guile and resourcefulness. I can't imagine anyone not liking and cherishing her, and she performed minor miracles in striving to save the unsavable, but the task was beyond human capacity.

Not Believing

"Whistler's Grandmother" is one of those plays that has to be seen to be disbelieved. Possibly you will credit my evidence that it is terrible, but, as I sat there at the President Theater last night watching it with increasing dismay, I found it hard to accept the proof provided by my eyes and ears that it was really as amateurish and inept as it clearly was. After all these years of being a reviewer, I still have difficulty recognizing the fact that such things can really be.

One matter in particular comes to mind. This is supposed to be the professional Broadway theater, and, if such a play can be accepted for commercial production and brought along to the point of actual first-night performance, what can be the quality of the dramas and comedies that are turned down for production or collapse during rehearsal? You may think that, if this is a sample of what can be presented, the rejected works must be horrible beyond imagination, until you recall that "Whistler's Grandmother" can find sponsors but an O'Casey play can't.

National Need

Hurrying away from that sore point as quickly as possible, I'll tell you that Mr. Finch's comedy deals with the vital issue of America's pressing need for grandmothers. The saloon-keeper and his girl are apparently lost without one, and so are three aging loafers who hang around the bar, but they are all made so deliriously happy when the pseudo-grandmother arrives that they won't let her leave when they find she's a fake. I guess it's supposed to be rather touching.

What little there is of the play that's bearable is clearly due to Mrs. Hull's industriousness, charm and humor, but, considering what he has to work on, I thought Lonny Chapman also brought a surprising amount of credibility to the role of the saloon-keeper. The others strive gamely, but the characters they have to play are so dull and their lines so feeble that they haven't a chance. It is pleasant to see Josephine Hull again, which is more than I can say for her vehicle.